

A Guide to the Giles County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1842-1903

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1842-1903

A Collection in the Library of Virginia
Library of Virginia
2012

History

Processed by: T. Taylor

Title Statement

A Guide to the Giles County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1842-1903

Subtitle: Giles County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1842-1903

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Publication Statement

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Profile Description

Creation: Machine-readable finding aid derived from being created directly into EAD, created by Greg Crawford, 09 March 2012

Language Usage: Description is in English

Descriptive Summary

Language

English

Collector

Giles County (Va.) Circuit Court

Physical Characteristics

.15 cubic feet (1 box).

Location

Library of Virginia

Repository

Library of Virginia

Administrative Information

Access Restrictions

Digital images for pre-1866 coroners' inquisitions that involve enslaved and free Black and Multiracial individuals are available on the Virginia Untold: the African American Narrative web site. Please use digital images.

Use Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

Acquisition Information

These records came to the Library of Virginia in a transfer of court records from Giles County in an undated accession.

Processing Information

Giles County Coroners' Inquisitions were processed and indexed as two separate units. The bulk of the records were processed in 2012 for the purpose of inclusion in Virginia Untold. Therefore, at the time of processing, pre-1865 records related to enslaved and free Black and Multiracial individuals were isolated and indexed or the purposes of digitizing them for the digital project Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative. In March 2025, the remaining pre-1865 and post-1865 inquests were indexed by M. Long.

Encoded by G. Crawford, 2012; updated by M. Long, April 2025.

Preferred Citation

Giles County (Va.) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1842-1903. Local government records collection, Giles County Court Records. The Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA 23219.

Adjunct Descriptive Data

Related Material

Records related to enslaved and free Black and Multiracial individuals of Giles County and other localities are available through [Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative](#) on the Library of Virginia website.

Additional Giles County court records can be found on microfilm at the Library of Virginia. Consult "[A Guide to Virginia County and City Records on Microfilm.](#)"

Historical Information

Context for Record Type: A carry over from the British system, the separate office of coroner appeared in Virginia about 1660. The judicial duty of the office was to hold inquisitions in cases when persons met a sudden, violent, unnatural or suspicious death, or death without medical attendance. The law did not encourage the Coroner to be a medical professional until the 20th century, and only stipulated that the local court be responsible for the appointment. Although not reliant on profession, this system of affluent white men making the decisions largely ensured that only other white men served in this position for much of its history

Prior to the Civil War, the coroner would summon a jury of twelve white men, usually prominent citizens of that locality, to assist him in determining cause of death. The jury viewed the body of the deceased and heard the testimony of witnesses which did include both white and Black perspectives. This witness testimony was recorded and after seeing and hearing the evidence, and unlike other judicial proceedings, enslaved people could provide depositions in coroner's inquisitions, but still, an all-white jury delivered in writing to the coroner their conclusion concerning cause of death referred to as the inquisition. These causes of death would be determined by a white perspective and Black individuals were only consulted; they were never in a position to make decisions. After the Civil War, the process remained the same but the racial distinctions stipulating jury eligibility no longer remained. However, as appointments still continued and juror eligibility reserved for those "entitled to vote and hold office," the authority and influence in the hands of white citizens remained throughout the late 19th and early 20th century.

In 1877, an act of the General Assembly changed the number of jurors to six, and by 1926, only the coroner determined cause of death but they could require physicians to assist them with determining cause of death. Then in 1946, the General Assembly abolished the Coroner's office/ office of Coroner's Physician altogether, appointed instead a Chief Medical Examiner, and by 1950 transitioned to a statewide Office of the Chief Medical Examiner which now lives within the Department of Health.

If a criminal act was determined to be the cause of death, the coroner delivered the guilty person to the sheriff and the inquests would be used as evidence in the criminal trial. In this case, coroner's inquisitions were filed with the trial papers. If there was not a trial, coroner's inquisitions were filed separately and are more likely to appear in this collection as a standalone set of documents.

Locality History: Giles County was named for William Branch Giles, United States senator from Virginia in 1806 when the county was created from Montgomery, Monroe (now in West Virginia), and Tazewell Counties. Several subsequent additions were made from Wythe (1808), Monroe in 1829 and Mercer in 1841 (both now in West Virginia), Craig (1880), and Tazewell (1826 and 1836) Counties. The county seat is Pearisburg.

Scope and Content

Materials in the Library of Virginia's collections contain historical terms, phrases, and images that are offensive to modern readers. These include demeaning and dehumanizing references to race, ethnicity, and nationality; enslaved or free status; physical and mental ability; religion; sex; and sexual orientation and gender identity.

Coroners' Inquisitions contain graphic and in some cases violent or otherwise disturbing descriptions of death.

Giles County (Va) Coroners' Inquisitions, 1842-1903, contains investigations into the deaths of individuals who died by a sudden, violent, unnatural or suspicious manner, or died without medical attendance. Causes of death found in these records include accidental, alcohol, drowning, homicide, injuries, infanticide, medical conditions, natural causes ("visitation by God"), and suicide.

Documents commonly found in coroners' inquisitions include the inquisition, depositions, and summons. Some inquisitions contain other documents such as exhibits. Information found in the inquisition include the name of the coroner, the names of the jurors, the name and age of the deceased if known, gender and race of the deceased, and when, how, and by what means the deceased came to his or her death. If the coroner knew the deceased person to be Black or Multiracial, the inquest should identify the person individual's legal status (free or enslaved). If the coroner knew the deceased person to be enslaved, the inquest often includes their name, their enslaver and the enslaver's residence. Information found in the depositions include the name of the deponent(s) and their account of the circumstances that led to the death of the deceased.

Notable records in this collection include the inquisition held in the death of Erastus E. Hale in 1844. Hale's wife was accused of poisoning him and the deceased's body was exhumed in order to perform an autopsy. The coroners' inquisition includes a detailed written account of how the autopsy was performed.

Arrangement

This collection is arranged into the following series:

- Series I: Coroners Inquisitions, 1842-1903, chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the local court.

Contents List

Series I: Coroners Inquisitions, 1842-1903

Extent

.15 cubic feet (1 box)

Physical Location Library of Virginia

Arrangement

Chronological by date coroner filed inquisition in the local court.

Barcode number 0007325989: Coroners' Inquisitions, 1842-1903

Library of Virginia